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A fatal collision of old and new

For some immigrants, suicide is the final refuge

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The March 10 suicide of Chau Yang was, according to those close to her, the very personal act of an individual with a number of unique problems and no solutions in sight. She had tried to poison herself once before — just before fleeing Laos in 1975 — and so her second attempt was not a complete surprise.

But her suicide was also a very social act, they said — an extreme reaction to the intense culture shock and confusion that many Hmong and other recent refugees have felt in America. Last fall, another refugee, an Ethiopian who had been in Philadelphia two years, killed himself.

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As described by her grandson Joua Vang, the sorrows of Chau Yang's life were indeed great.

And her life and death also suggest some of the ways in which Hmong traditions — indeed, the old-country ways of many refugee and immigrant groups — do not always work in this country. Yet, as seen with Chau Yang, the traditions are very hard to give up.

Chau Yang was born in the highlands of Laos, in a small village where she lived a traditional tribal life. She was one of two wives of a peasant farmer who, in the early 1950s, joined the fledgling Hmong militia that was then helping the French. In 1954, her husband was killed in action.

Chau Yang did not remarry, and lived with her son and four daughters until the daughters married and moved into the homes of their husbands. In Hmong society, several Hmong made clear, it is simply unthinkable for a woman to live with her married daughter.

In the early 1960s, the CIA began actively recruiting Hmong farmers into their then-secret army to fight the communists of Laos and neighboring North Vietnam. Chau Yang's only son, Neng Ka Vang, joined the Hmong guerrilla army and in 1963 he, too, was killed in the fighting.

Several years later, Vietnamese communists overran her village, and Chau Yang fled along with her son's widow and her four children to Long Chien, the headquarters of the Hmong army. Within several years, the widow remarried, her daughters married and moved out, and Chau Yang was left living only with her grandson, Joua Vang. With the communist victory in 1975, Joua Vang, his new wife and his grandmother fled to Thailand and then the West.

Joua Vang did well after arriving in Philadelphia in 1978; he learned English and got a job with the Nationalities Service Center. His grandmother, who could not read or write Hmong, never learned any English, and never could adjust to city living.

In Laos, she could have looked forward to an old age of working the family vegetable patch, taking care of the great-grandchildren, gossiping with the other older ladies. In Philadelphia, she spent her last days inside a dark, drafty rowhouse.

"The only things she really liked to do were to call her sister in California, and the daughter in Michigan," Joua Vang said. "And that we could not do very much."

In the cassette tape she left to explain her suicide, Chau Yang repeated again and again that she was lonely. She said she was particularly sad that her Michigan daughter wasn't a son — so she could live with him.

"And then she told [the daughter] how to dress her after she died, and she told the clan leader to come and see if I did a good job with the funeral," Joua Vang said. "For the Hmong people, it is most important to treat our family correctly."